



The New Connection by **TheRealSokka**

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Summary: A slightly different turn of events, based on the only complaint I had with Season 2: El and the others have far too little time together and her and Will never actually get to talk to each other properly, which is something I felt was needed after the events of Season 1. So this story picks up during 2x2: Trick or Treat, Freak! Please Read and Review.

1. The Ghost

The Ghost

"Watch it, Zombie Boy!"

"Trick or Treat, Freak!"

Will stumbled backwards and fell, Bob's camera slipping from his grip. The bullies' laughter faded out as he hit the ground, like a badly tuned radio. When he sat up, they were gone. But so was everyone else: where just moments ago kids had strolled around the street trick-or-treating, he was suddenly completely alone. Will's heart nearly stopped when he recognized the darkness and the twisting vines of the Upside Down. *No. No!* "Mike?" he called out hesitantly. His friend had been with him just moments ago.

There was no reply. The panic was starting to creep in. "Mike!" he called again, louder.

Something heard him. From within the woods, he heard a chittering, almost like laughter. A second one answered somewhere behind him, then another. Will spun on the spot, throwing panicked glances between the trees, but in the gloom he couldn't see anything. He put his hands over his ears in an attempt to shut out the growing noise. It brought back awful memories of the Demogorgon stalking him through the woods. It had made almost the same sound. But that thing had died; they said it had died. Eleven had killed it.

He turned to look at the house and saw someone standing there. It wasn't the monster; it was someone from the other side, an actual person, here in the Upside down. They were small, almost like a child, and they were staring back at him: They saw him. In his surprise, Will almost stumbled again. "Hey!" he shouted. "I'm here!"

The other one heard him. They started to wave their arms frantically, but if they said anything, Will couldn't hear it over the sudden low rumbling that now swept over the street. Even the chittering suddenly fell silent. Will slowly turned around, eyes wide with fear. It

was coming from the other end of the street, right opposite to where the person was standing, but after a few hundred feet, everything in that direction was submerged in shadow. Will took a slow step backwards.

And then the shadow rose behind the trees. Like an enormous black cloud, it twisted and spread into the sky, until it towered over Hawkins.

Someone was shouting something at him. Will didn't comprehend it: the blood was pounding in his ears, he was frozen to the spot; paralyzed by fear. He could only watch as the shadow unfolded and spread into several black tendrils, reaching out and churning like smoke. Then something like a head emerged. There were no eyes, but Will felt the evil gaze fall on him, fixing him as it closed in. Pure panic took over and he ran, ran as fast as he could. He could feel the darkness right behind him.

There was the house, crawling with vines. The person was gone, almost like they had never been there at all. Will hid behind a wall and hugged his knees, praying that it would pass. He couldn't keep his body from shaking. Even with his eyes shut, he could feel it creeping closer; it reached out to him...

"Will!"

And suddenly Mike was there, shaking him by the shoulders. Shock was edged on his face: "Will! What's wrong? Are you hurt?!"

Will looked around in panic, but the monster was gone. Instead, his friends were all around him; Dustin, Lucas and Max, all looking worried. "Is he okay?" Lucas was saying.

"I don't know." Mike said. He never let go of Will: "I'm going to get you home, okay? Come on, I'm going to get you home..."

Will was too shaken to reply. He could still feel the shadow on his skin. He was aware that Dustin was saying something, but Mike seemed to brush him off and led Will away from the others. Will stumbled along with him. He didn't dare let go of his friend, afraid of being pulled back into the Upside Down at any moment.

Mike sat down in his little makeshift tent and took up his supercom. *Maybe today...* It took him a while before he began to speak: "It's day 353 today. I had a bad day. I don't know, I... I guess I wish you were here." He wished it more than he could possibly put into words, but he tried anyway. "I mean, we all do. If you're out there, just, please, give me a sign-

"Mike."

He faltered and looked up from the walkie-talkie. He thought... "Eleven?" he whispered. There was no one to hear him, the room was empty- and yet it wasn't. Again he felt it; like she was almost close enough to touch, if he only reached out. She was *there*, only...

But of course she wasn't. She never was. This was pointless. Mike folded the antenna back in, holding back tears. He couldn't keep doing this. He wasn't Venkman; he couldn't really catch ghosts, no matter how much he wanted to. "I'm really going crazy." he muttered.

"Hmm?"

From the couch, Will was blinking at him sleepily. Mike looked away, feeling stupid. He hadn't meant to wake him. "Told you." he said bitterly. "Talking to ghosts."

"It's your job." Will yawned and tapped his *Ghostbusters* badge.

Mike couldn't laugh. "Yeah? Well, I'm not good at it."

Will was wide awake now, and he realized what his friend was talking about. He lowered his eyes: "I'm sorry."

Mike broke away. He felt so angry all of a sudden. "Sorry? Sorry for what? That you came back from the Upside Down and El didn't?! You're here, like- like a friend should be, but she's just...gone, yet I still keep seeing her, and I *feel* like she's out there, but she's just not talking to me..." He had become quieter with every word, until the last was barely a whisper.

Will moved over to him. He felt like he should say something, but he didn't know what.

Mike drew a deep breath: "I'm just- I'm just wondering, all the time, what I could have done differently, you know? She was always protecting us, even at the end, but maybe if I could have done something, stopped the Demogorgon, somehow..." He noticed Will staring at him and shook his head: "I know it's stupid. The best we could do was hitting it with tiny stones. Stupid."

Will wasn't really seeing his friend. Now that the shock of the encounter had died down, his mind had cleared and something had clicked into place at Mike's words. "I saw someone," he said slowly. "When I was in the Upside Down, before you snapped me out of it. I saw someone in the distance, and I- I think I heard them call my name. They knew me."

Mike's eyes grew wide. "Who? Who was it?"

"They were too far away." Will met his friend's look. He didn't want to give Mike false hope, but he had this feeling that he was right. "It could have been Eleven."

"Could have been?! Did she say something else, anything?"

"No. No, I'm sorry."

Mike felt like he had been punched in the gut. If Will had seen El, too, maybe he wasn't crazy. To think that she could be... But it was impossible, he thought. The hope that had flickered up in him dimmed just as fast. He desperately wanted it to be true, but it couldn't be. "No," he forced himself to say. "There is no way she could have survived in there this long. No one could."

"But what if?" The more Will thought about it, the surer he was. Who else could it have been? She had tried to warn him... And for a moment, Mike had sounded so hopeful... Will's hands balled into fists. He had to summon his courage to speak the next words: "Maybe- I don't know, I can look for her when I- when I go back there."

"No!" Mike looked at his friend, aghast. "You're not going there just for me; because I'm being stupid and I'm seeing things..."

"Oh shut up; it's going to happen anyway!" Will burst out. "I can't get out of this, you understand? Do you think I just want to shiver and hide all the time? Maybe I can actually do something when it happens, and not just- wait for it to get me!"

Mike drew back in surprise. He glanced at the ceiling, wondering whether his parents had heard that. When there was no noise from above, he said quietly: "That's the first time I remember you shouting."

Will realized he was panting. He didn't know where it had come from, he just felt so- angry and helpless. He sat down on the couch. Again the shadows of the Upside Down flashed behind his eyes. It just didn't leave him alone; it was like a nightmare that he had to live through again and again. Only- he had never seen another person there before. Maybe this was the reason this was happening to him; maybe he could finally return the favour to Eleven.

"Do you...do you really think you could find her?"

There was such hope in Mike's voice, even though he was trying to keep it out. Will bit his lip. Even though Mike almost never talked about her, it was obvious how much Eleven meant to him. He had never believed that she was dead, like all the others seemed to think. How could he, Will, not try everything he could to bring her back? She had done the same for him.

Eleven opened her eyes. The TV's static image switched back to an ad on Coca Cola, but she hardly noticed it: her breathing was going fast and her skin was covered in goose-bumps that had nothing to do with the autumn chill outside. She hugged herself in an effort to get warm again. Then she clicked through the channels until she found static and closed her eyes. Her thoughts were racing. She was afraid what she would find once she looked again, yet she was even more scared of not knowing.

She hadn't meant for anything to happen. It was Halloween night and all she had wanted to do was see her friend. She wasn't disobeying any of the rules: If she couldn't go trick-or-treating, she thought she could at least watch her friends going around the houses doing it.

And so she watched, even though the pangs of envy were hard to ignore. It was almost a year now, and the desire to be out there had grown to be almost unbearable.

Her friend didn't look like he was enjoying it. She wanted to see him smile again; she liked his smile. But Mike was very quiet, like he so often was when she saw him by himself. Now he was with friends, though; El could hear their echoes close to him, and he was carrying a bag full of treats. He should be happy. She knew she would be happy if she were really there with them.

Walking invisibly by Mike's side was no real consolation, but it helped. After so long, she had become so familiar with him that she no longer had to strain to keep the connection. As the treat tour continued, she ran along with the group, watched them as they robbed the neighbours and exchanged their haul, and pretended to plunder Mike's bag for chocolate. He was just ringing another doorbell, and El was preparing to shout: "Trick or Treat!", when the image of Mike became distorted from one moment to the next. He dissolved into nothing and she was suddenly alone in the void. The words caught in her throat and she looked around, startled. What had happened? She concentrated harder, trying to bring the images back. The void responded only with silence.

And then suddenly a boy was there, but it wasn't Mike. He was short and thin and wore almost the same costume. She recognized him as Mike's friend, Will, the boy they had saved from the Upside Down. Surprised as she was, she was glad that he looked a lot better than when she had last seen him. But she was only focussing on Mike now; so he shouldn't be there.

That was when he turned and looked directly at her. Eleven's eyes widened when she realized that he could see her. "Hey!" he shouted. Eleven didn't move. She was too puzzled to respond. How could he see her?

And then she had felt it: the crawling cold on her skin. It was exactly like the first time she had entered the Void: the presence of something from the other side, a presence that wanted to kill. But now it felt like it wasn't coming for her; it simply brushed over her, as if not even realizing she was there. Even this light touch made her

shiver, as she felt something like a dark, concentrated will passing her by. And then she knew, she felt, that all its focus was on the boy in front of her, who seemed frozen to the spot. Finally, Eleven found her voice. She screamed at him to run. Whether he heard her or not, he did move and bolted, running directly towards her. For a second she could see the pure panic written on his face, before his figure, too, dissolved into mist and only the low growling of the monster chasing him remained. That was when she lost focus and awoke back in the hut.

In her nervousness it took her a long time to find them again. The fear of what had happened kept her in the here and now, unable to slip off into senselessness. Once she finally managed it and the image reappeared, she breathed an audible sigh of relief: Her friends were alive. They both looked okay, and the strange cold she had felt was gone; nothing was chasing them. Mike was walking with one arm around Will, he clearly knew something had happened, and he was trying to help. Will was barely responding to what he was saying. He kept looking over his shoulder, and El had to resist the impulse to hide, but now his wide-eyed looks were passing right through her; as everyone's usually did. She couldn't understand it: He was the first person to actually see her. Mike came close sometimes, but with Will, their eyes had locked for a short moment, and she hadn't even been focusing on him. It was very strange.

She accompanied them for half a mile before she had to break the connection: the effort along with the shock had left her exhausted. She turned off the TV and wiped the blood from her nose. Then, however, she had to face the question what she should do now: there was something powerful from the Upside Down in Hawkins, and it was targeting her friends- and had almost gotten one of them. She barely knew Will, but he was Mike's friend and he seemed kind- and the look on his face had reminded her far too much of her own horror when she was first thrown into the Upside Down. She didn't wish that on anybody. But she couldn't go outside to help them; Jim had told her again and again that she would only endanger her friends further if she did.

She glanced at her watch: 7:38. Jim was late, but he would be home soon; he had promised. Soon.

The word was one of the first she had learned from Jim Hopper, and she loathed it. At the beginning, it had been a good word: it spoke of a swift reunion with her friends and of a real life outside the lab. As the days passed and nothing happened, she liked it less and less. When the days stretched into months, she grew to hate it, and now she had come to realize how terribly long 'soon' could be. He would be home soon...

Eleven stood up abruptly. No more, she thought, throwing off her blanket. She couldn't keep doing this forever; just watching and never touching, like a ghost behind a window. She wasn't a ghost, and she could do something to help. She didn't know what yet, but sitting here any longer was impossible.

Something made her stop a few feet from the door. She could hear his voice telling her to be cautious and wait, like he always did, and suddenly she felt bad. "Com-promise." she said aloud. She remained unseen and Mike and the others would be safe; that was the promise Jim had made her, and what she had promised in return. You didn't break such promises.

But they weren't safe at all, not from what she had felt out there. She grimaced and took a step forward. Could she even do anything against what she had felt out there? She would never find out if she stayed in here. Another step. Jim would never approve of her risking everything. But it would never not be dangerous; she would be careful. Another step. It was simple: she would go to her friends and warn them. No one else would see her. She would go to Mike...

Her hand froze inches from the doorknob. The very thought made her almost afraid. It had been so long now. What would he say? He wanted her to come back, she knew that. But what could she say? How would she explain...

Her arm fell limp to her side. For a long while, El just stood there. Then she slowly turned away from the door and retreated, not without shattering a glass frame on the wall with one angry swing. She was angry at everything that had gotten her here, at Jim for being late, at the thing for threatening her friends; but even more she was frustrated with herself for being so cowardly. She tried to tell herself that it was just common sense not to do anything rash, though

it didn't really convince her.

Lacking anything else to do, she grabbed one of the last boxes of eggos from the fridge and sat down on the couch. The curtains opened seemingly of their own accord and let in the cool night air. It made her feel a little better at least. As she chewed on the waffles, her eyes wandered to the clock: 7:51. Soon. Her anger ebbed a little. Jim would know what to do, she thought. He usually had an answer to most things. If she told him what she had seen, he would believe her. It hurt that he hadn't kept his promise, but she knew he would do anything to protect her and the others. And maybe, a part of her hoped, maybe he would tell Mike when this was all over.

Hope. That was a good word. It was a good feeling just to have someone she could talk to when she didn't know what to do. It was more than she had ever had before.

2. Paladin, Cleric, Mage

Thank you for all the kind reviews so far, it really means a lot. This has been a lot of fun writing , and I hope I'll get around to finishing it.

Paladin, Cleric, Mage

"Aaargh!" The black, expressionless face hovered inches above the boy's head, emitting low, ominous breaths. At any moment, the red blade could slice through him, like it had Obi Wan on the Death Star, if the face behind the mask decided he had outlived his usefulness.

Will blinked at his friend. He was still there, as was the rest of the basement. He sat up: "Still nothing. You're just not scary enough."

Mike cursed and threw away the Darth Vader mask in exasperation. "This is so stupid. My parents are going to hear any moment. If there is a way to send you to the Upside Down, this is not it."

"Guess not. But, I mean, we had to start somewhere. A shock was what triggered it last time, so I figured it could work."

"Well, it doesn't. We just don't know anything about how any of this works."

Will had to admit he was right. The one thing they sort of knew was that Mike could snap him out of his state once he was there; it was the only reason his friend had even agreed to trying this. Neither of them had felt like they would be able to sleep that night, so Will had wanted to try if he couldn't return to the Upside Down in a controlled way. Of course, it wasn't that easy.

Mike had begun to pace: "Describe again what you saw. She just appeared? Did she look okay?"

Will wished he had been able to focus more; as it was, everything was a blur. "I wish I could tell you more." he said, meaning every

word of it. Ever since his mother had told him of how his rescue had transpired, he'd felt like he owed Eleven. But what good was his vision if they couldn't make sense of it?

"This is all no good. What use is it that we know she's alive when we can't do anything?!" Mike flopped himself down on the carpet.

Will wanted so much to do something to help, but he was just as lost as his friend. "You know, I don't even know what she looks like." he said quietly. The words were simply coming out of him: "All I remember is someone kneeling by my side within my hiding place in Castle Byers. It was like this- glimmer of hope that I'd all but given up after all that time there." He looked Mike in the eye: "Without that, I don't know if I wouldn't have given up long before mom and Hopper came."

Mike looked up: "Don't say that. Of course you wouldn't have given up. You're one of the strongest people I know. You managed to escape the Demogorgon for so long, on your own." He smiled: "Impressive for a little cleric." Will grinned in embarrassment: strong was one of the last words he would use to describe himself. Eleven, he thought, she had been strong. Mike must have thought the same when he continued: "To think El might have been there all this time... We have to find a way to contact her." he said with new resolve. "Okay, think; what can we do?"

"Maybe-", Will began, "we should look at Castle Byers. That's where she found me, perhaps- I don't know, maybe that's a connection."

Mike looked skeptical: "You think so?"

It was more of a hope. "I don't know. Perhaps, we've got this all wrong and we can't contact El at all; just the other way around. But we could try."

"I guess it's a start." Mike paused for a moment, having had a thought: "Will, do you feel- exhausted after these episodes?"

That sounded like one of the questions the doctor at the lab would ask. Will frowned: "Not really. Why?"

"Eleven. Everything she did cost her energy. I was just wondering if this could be something similar, like these visions were you creating a connection to her or something."

Will scoffed: "I think I'd know if I'd brought some supernatural powers back from that place, if that's what you're asking. I told you, I have no control over what is happening, and until yesterday I certainly didn't want it."

"Of course not, sorry. It's just- you having psychic powers would be really helpful right about now."

Will managed a half-smile: "I've always wanted to be a wizard."

"Maybe El can teach you, once we find her. Surely you must have some potential." Mike yawned. Will smiled when he noticed his friend was no longer saying 'if'.

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When Karen Wheeler came down into the kitchen the next morning, she was surprised to find it nearly empty. Only her husband was there in his bed robe, reading the morning newspaper. Usually either Nancy or Mike would be already at the table toasting their bread, and she had come to know Will as even more of an early bird. She cleared her throat: "Hey, Ted. Have the boys not come up yet?"

Her husband not so much as glanced up: "Mm Hmm. Must be still sleeping."

"That would be a first." Nancy had visited that late party yesterday, so she likely needed some sleep, but the others had been home almost suspiciously punctual. She decided to check on them, lest they were late for school.

As she descended the cellar steps, a strange noise reached her ears. The two boys were lying on the sofa; not sleeping, but twisting and groaning. Mike was holding his stomach. He looked up when she came in: "Mom. I feel sick."

"Me too." Will groaned to his right.

"Oh dear, what's wrong?" Mrs. Wheeler asked, worried. Then her eyes fell on the table, brimming with empty candy bars, and she got the picture. She gave an exhausted sigh: "Dear me; Mike Wheeler, when will you grow up and learn to control your greed?! Wasn't the disaster with the cotton candy lesson enough for you?"

Mike doubled over: "Ow! I'm sorry mum."

"Sorry, Mrs. Wheeler. It was such a fun Halloween; we lost track. Ouch!"

Karen looked at Will's pained face, and her expression softened. "Oh boys. Is it very bad? Do you feel able to go to school?"

Two pairs of pitiful puppy eyes looked up at her. Mrs. Wheeler swallowed the scolding she had wanted to make: "I'm going to get you some hot water bottles, see if it helps." She grimaced when Will groaned again. "I'm sorry, my dear, but if it doesn't get better, we can't take you to a doctor until we are back from work. Or do you want me to call your mum?"

"No, she- she'll be busy. I don't want to worry her. But thank you, Mrs. Wheeler."

"Okay. Okay, try to get well. If you'll feel better, I'll leave you some breakfast." She shook her head as she climbed the steps: "I only hope you'll learn something from this. You're old enough to know better."

The instant the door closed, Mike relaxed and turned over on his stomach: "Incredible. She must really have a soft spot for you. Usually I'd be on my way to school by now, stomach ache or no."

Will grinned: "'Cotton candy disaster'?"

"Shut up."

They waited until they heard the Wheeler's car leave the driveway before they threw away the blankets and bottles. Mike grabbed the box of peeled candy from behind the sofa, and after a hasty breakfast, they swung onto their bikes and rode off towards the woods. The feeling that they were doing something brought a certain elation, even though theirs wasn't so much a plan as a vague idea. Neither

had bothered to change out of their costumes, and as they entered the shade of the trees, Will began to hum the *Ghostbusters* tune.

Mike was on the walkie-talkie: "Yes, Lucas, now. No, I don't... Look, just tell her whatever. It's really important. Yes, I know you do. Over and Out." He turned to Will: "He says he'll be there fast as he can. But I can't reach Dustin; he's just not responding."

"Maybe he's overslept?" Will suggested.

Mike turned off the road and into the forest: "First lesson today is science. He's never late for that."

After a few minutes, they reached the little hut made of wooden logs that Jonathan and Will had named Castle Byers. Above it, the American flag was hanging low, with no wind to lift it. The place was empty. Mike had half expected Eleven to just show up here. He felt disappointed, even though he knew that was stupid. "So, what now?" he asked.

"I don't know. I guess we wait a while and see if something happens." Will wasn't sure anymore either. He held up the sheet that covered the entrance for Mike to enter.

The interior was cozy more than anything else. Mike had always liked how it felt like a small, lived in room rather than an actual forest hut. You could immediately see who lived here: The walls were lined with colorful drawings and the matching pens and paper were all scattered over the floor and the little table Will used to draw on. The head of the household entered behind Mike and blushed: "Oh man. Gimme a moment to tidy this up."

While he was busy, Mike's glance fell on a half-finished picture on the table. It showed a group of people in colorful cloaks, each one brandishing either sword, staff or bow. The faces looked familiar. Mike took it up and inspected it closer. "Is that us?" he asked.

"Hmm? Yeah." Will replied when he saw what Mike was looking at. "I must have lost our old one somewhere, and it was outdated anyway."

"Outdated?" Mike asked when he noticed the empty space next to the

paladin. Upon looking closer, he found the outline of another character. Any features were missing, but she had a shaved head and there were sparks flying from her fingers.

"You- you've added El." he said.

"Oh, it's just a rough sketch. I couldn't draw her better without a picture or something. But, I mean, now that we have a mage in the party, I couldn't leave her out."

Mike had to clear his throat. "Yeah. Um, Will? Thanks."

"For what?"

Mike averted his eyes: "I don't know, just- thank you. Really."

"O-Okay. Yeah, no problem." Will took the picture from Mike and looked at each party member. He suddenly felt weirdly happy. This was almost like *before*, when their group used to just meet up here at the castle and play their games; without any real monsters to worry about. He would have liked to just talk for a few moments longer. But as long as that gap remained in their picture, they couldn't do that.

That gap- his eyes were drawn by it. He felt like there was something missing... Before he knew it, his hand had found a pen and he began scribbling at El's outline.

"Will?" Mike asked, perplexed. "What are you doing?" His friend didn't seem to hear. For a moment, Mike was afraid that he had slipped off again, and he shook him by the shoulder: "Hey!"

Will blinked. He looked startled: "I..."

Mike scooted closer to see what he had been drawing. Then he looked up and almost whispered: "El doesn't have long hair..."

Will looked at the curly mat of hair that had just sprung from his pen. He didn't know where it had come from. But it looked right, somehow. With a few more lines, he added a pair of open, curious eyes to the empty face. Mike watched in awe, not daring to interrupt. When El's figure was wearing the beginnings of a winter coat, Will stopped. There was something more, something else. He started

rummaging in a box next to him, searching for a different color.

"Will?" Mike breathed. "Are you seeing something?"

"It's like- I feel like there's something at the back of my head." Will murmured. "Like, this important stuff you can never remember, no matter how hard you try." He produced another pen, a gold crayon: "Perhaps I can draw it, though." He leaned backwards to reach for a blank sheet of paper, when suddenly his hand touched something slimy. Surprised, he pulled away to find a sticky, foul smelling substance on his fingertips. He shook out his hand, but it wouldn't come off. The stuff looked somehow familiar.

And then the entire room was covered in it: the castle was submerged in gloom; the pictures rotted away and the logs falling to pieces. Mike was gone. Will gasped. "Mike?" he whispered. No answer. It was an effort to stay calm. "If you can hear me; it's working: I'm in the Upside Down." he said overly loudly, hoping that his friend heard him. He tried his best to slow down his breathing: Mike was in here with him, he could pull him out if something should happen. There was nothing to worry about. This was what they had hoped would happen. Will remembered that he couldn't waste any time: he had to look around for Eleven. Resolved, he pulled away the rotting sheet and stepped outside.

The shadow was right there. Like an enormous black spider, it hovered over Castle Byers, extending tendrils of smoke to all sides. The instant Will appeared it knew he was there. Will's breath caught in his throat. Before he could do anything, a gust of wind swept him from his feet and he fell back against the logs. The shadow monster churned, and he felt something like triumph. A mass of darkness descended from its center and moved towards him. Will couldn't move; it was like he had been paralyzed. He tried to scream, but no sound escaped his mouth. Something wrapped around his legs and wandered upwards, hungrily reaching for his face...

The next moment, the sun was shining again and his friend's hand was in his. Mike was shouting at him: "Will! It's me, wake up! You have to..." He breathed a sigh of relief when their eyes connected. "Hey. Are you...?"

Will spun around and stared at the empty air above the castle. It was like he could still hear the echo of the monster's angry roar lingering in the forest air. "Run!" he croaked. Mike's eyes widened, but he didn't ask: he pulled Will to his feet and dragged him along to their bikes. Will didn't dare look back.

They didn't stop until they reached the road into Hawkins. Mike jumped off his bike: "What happened? Was it the shadow monster again?"

Will nodded weakly. It had been so close the entire time; had Mike not woken him, it would have had him. He realized it could still be right with them, and he would never know until it pulled him back. He had to pull himself together not to just keep running. Meeting Mike's worried look, he stammered: "It-It was there. It's stalking me, wherever I go. It was there, right there, right above us. It..it..." He started to shiver uncontrollably.

Mike hugged him. He didn't have any words; he just hugged Will and felt him sob against his shoulder. His friend felt cold, as if he still wasn't fully here. Mike cursed silently; most of all himself for agreeing to this. He couldn't imagine what Will went through when he blacked out, but he saw the outcome, and he felt monstrously selfish for letting him go through that alone. It was taking too heavy a toll. There was nothing he could do other than just hold his friend. Slowly, Will's sobs subsided. Mike heard a tiny, muffled: "Sorry."

The sound of a bell made them both jump. A lone bike was driving towards them. Mike relaxed when he recognized the driver and cursed, audibly this time: "Shit, Lucas! Where have you been?"

Lucas screeched to a halt: "I came as fast as I could, okay?! My nosy sister isn't as easy to fool as your parents. What's up with all the rush?" Then he saw Will and went pale: "What's wrong?"

"A lot." Mike slowly let go: "Are you okay?"

Will took a shuddering breath: "Yeah. Yeah, I'm okay."

"Whoa, nothing here is okay! What happened to you?"

It didn't escape Mike that Will was still looking around wide-eyed. This was not the place for such an explanation. "Let's go back to my place." he suggested, fighting back disappointment. For a moment he had thought they were as step closer to finding Eleven, but instead it looked like he'd almost lost Will; and he didn't want to risk that ever again.

Lucas was at a loss: "Didn't you say you wanted to meet up at Castle...?"

"No!" the two said unanimously.

3. Madman's Knowledge

Madman's Knowledge

The Wheeler's basement seemed somehow colder than it had a few hours ago, even though the sun was brightly shining through the windows. Will huddled beneath a blanket that failed to provide any warmth. He wasn't yet fully here, not really. His skin felt like there were tiny insects crawling all over it, silently gnawing away at him; bringing him closer to the Upside Down piece by piece. The Shadow was still watching him. Like a Dark Wraith, it was right by his side, unseen, lurking for another moment of weakness to strike; and he knew there was nothing he could do once it did and the world turned dark again. As it would, inevitably. There was nothing he could do.

But Mike was there, too. He was still by his side, had never left it. His eyes were full of warm concern, and they didn't turn away from him for more than a few moments, as if afraid he would vanish. And Will refused to vanish; he held on to this warmth, numb as his fingers were, silently promising not to let go. In this moment it was the only thing that anchored him in the here and now and would not let him give in to the pull of the other place. He didn't dare think about what would have happened had Mike not been with him, if he had gone to the forest by himself.

In the meantime, their party had grown, even though Dustin was still ominously absent. Lucas was pacing up and down the length of the room; his way of 'thinking'. His analytical mind was doing its best to organize the situation, where the other two were still in a state of paralysis. Finally he stopped and turned to Will: "Ok, so let me get this straight: some sort of shadow monster is stalking you- and only you. It keeps pulling you into the Upside Dow; that's what was happening yesterday. And now again in the forest. Like a second Demogorgon." He shook his head in disbelief: "I thought we'd had enough of that last year."

"This is different. With this thing, I could- *feel* what it was thinking." Will shuddered: "It's like- it doesn't want to hurt me, it just- *wants* me."

"That doesn't sound any better." Mike stated. He couldn't bear it any longer and took Will's hand, which still wouldn't stop shaking. Whatever was doing this to him, it was clearly not benevolent. "We have to stop you from slipping off like that again."

Will hugged his knees: "How?"

Mike had rarely felt so powerless. He glanced at Lucas: "We'll find a way. Together, we can think of something." he promised, trying to sound confident.

Lucas cursed: "Damn it. Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I- I didn't think it was really real at first. The doctors said it was just memories coming back..."

"Bullshit!" Mike said heatedly. "I saw what is happening to you; no one can tell me that's not real."

"Well, those eggheads clearly won't help then." Lucas scoffed. "But we should tell your mom, or Hopper, or someone."

"No, not mom." Will immediately protested. "I can't put her through that again. Not now when she's finally starting to stop worrying so much."

"I'd say this is a good enough reason to worry her, don't you think? Maybe one of them can think of some way to help."

Mike doubted that. "Help how, exactly? They don't know what this is; none of them have seen what Will has." Neither had he, and somehow that made it worse. It was like the slingshot versus the Demogorgon all over again; they still had no clue what they were up against and all they knew was that their opponent was infinitely stronger than them. Mike unconsciously reached into his pocket to feel for Will's incomplete drawing. Until they were back at their house, he hadn't even realized he had picked it up. When he'd looked at it then, Eleven was just as he remembered her, minus the strange hair. The paper crumpled beneath his fingers: he missed her so much it hurt. She would have known what to do.

Will's thoughts must have gone in the same direction. His eyes met

Mike's and all of a sudden they were filled with something else beside the fear: "But- even if I somehow stop having these visions- then we lose her." said the boy who had the most to lose.

Lucas frowned: "What are you talking about?"

"No. First we have to protect you from this thing, and then we can think about El." Even though Mike knew it was the right thing to do, he still felt a twinge of guilt saying it. He quickly turned to Lucas and tried to explain: "When Will had that episode on Halloween, he wasn't just seeing the monster. He saw someone else, too. El; she's..."

"What?" Lucas stopped in his tracks.

"I thought we were on the way to find her, but I was wrong, okay? I just delivered Will straight to this shadow thing." Will of course didn't see it like that; he would never blame him, but Mike was fully aware that only his eagerness to see El again had gotten them there, ignoring the risks. Still, despite it all, the thoughts of her just wouldn't go away. And so the next words still came out in a hesitant-hopeful jumble: "But back at Castle Byers, he had a sort of trance and he drew El, and I think she's trying to reach us; she has to be out there..." Mike realized he was talking far too fast and took a deep breath.

"You mean..." For a split second, Lucas looked at Will without skepticism. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but then his expression became guarded once again. "Are you sure that's what you saw? El?" he questioned.

"No, I'm not sure." Will said with frustration. "It's all hazy and blurred. But it has to be her. It felt like her."

Lucas shook his head, conflicting emotions battling under the surface. "Look, I want to believe it, I do. But El is – gone- and- I don't know why you're seeing her now, but..."

Mike hated that word, the finality with which people said it. It made El sound like the closed chapter of a book. "And with 'gone' you mean 'dead'. Just like everybody else does. We don't know what happened to her..."

"Mike..."

"...but everybody insists she's dead, just- just like they did with Will!"

"Mike, Eleven sacrificed herself to kill the Demogorgon." It took Lucas visible effort to say the words: "I'm sorry, but you saw the same as me: they both just evaporated right in front of us."

"That could mean anything..."

"No, it couldn't!"

"She could just have been transported to the Upside Down! I've heard her, Lucas. It wasn't just Will; I've heard her, too; for months, like she was trying to talk to me. I thought I was imagining it, but now- I know she's out there, I know it."

Lucas threw up his arms: "Then if she has this kind of connection, why doesn't she just tell you where she is? Hell, with her powers, she could've just phoned the police; or she would have found some other way to stand on your doormat within five minutes. Maybe you're only hearing what you want to hear, have you thought about that?"

Mike got to his feet, his chest too tight to speak. A desperate anger had taken hold of him that had to be directed at something, or else he would suffocate- mostly because Lucas was bringing up exactly the points that he asked himself over and over again; and to which he didn't have an answer. Why couldn't he just believe him?

"My mother heard me when I was stuck in the Upside Down, and no one believed her either." Will said quietly.

Lucas was lost for words for a moment. "That was different. No one knew what happened to you. With Eleven, we *saw* what happened." he repeated.

"Do you not *want* her to come back?!" Mike almost shouted.

"Of course I do! But wishing it doesn't make her real!"

"Then what about this?!" Mike practically shoved the picture into Lucas' face. "Look at that. Look at El! Will has never seen her before,

and yet he drew this. Are you going to tell me that's our imagination?"

Lucas stared at the life-like image, crumpled though it was. "Okay, I'll admit that's a little creepy. How did you...And why did you give her long hair?"

Will glanced at the picture and gave a helpless shrug: "I don't know. It just sort of happened."

"And I thought El was weird." Lucas muttered. But it seemed to have at least partly convinced him: "Ok, ok, fine; let's say all this does mean something; let's say El is somehow alive and out there. What was your plan, exactly? In finding her, I mean."

"We- didn't really have one." Mike had to admit, slowly calming down. "Back at Castle Byers, Will was definitely seeing something when he drew this. But then only seconds later he had this episode and that thing was there..." Mike stopped dead. His eyes widened with a sudden realization and he looked at his friend: "Maybe- maybe the shadow wanted to stop you before you saw too much! That means whatever it is; it's important and the shadow doesn't want us to know. Can you remember any of it?"

Will hesitated: "I don't know. Maybe. I can try."

"Hang on a moment." In his haste, Mike almost knocked down his Millennium Falcon to get to his desk. He tried his best not to look too hopeful as he placed a school notebook before his friend. Even Lucas scooted closer, skeptical though he looked. Will's brow furrowed in concentration as he stared at the sheet, willing something to appear. He wanted something to happen. Mike's theory had somehow breathed new energy into him; just the fact that he might have a bit of leverage, however small, against his nightmare. At the very least, it didn't make him feel so helpless anymore. He searched his mind for whatever had made him pick up the pencil an hour ago. He felt certain he could find it.

The Wheeler's doorbell rang up top.

Mike groaned. If that was one of his sister's stupid friends... "Don't

mind it!" he called as he went to answer. Will looked like he shouldn't be distracted at all right now; whoever was at the door had the worst timing ever. Mike opened it slightly: "Who's there? We're busy."

"Um, it's just me, Mike." a startled voice said. "Remember me? Dustin?"

Leave it to him to show up now of all times. Mike threw open the door: "Where have you been? Why didn't you answer your com?"

"Er, because I was in Science- where Mr. Clark wondered where all of *you* were. I told him you had all caught hay fever." A strangely smiling Dustin entered, eagerly holding out his trap-box: "But to more important matters; I have to show you something!"

Mike had to make an effort not to sound exasperated: "Yeah, sure, sure. We're kind of busy at the moment. The others are downstairs." Quick as he could, Mike flew back down the cellar steps, leaving Dustin to follow: "Anything?"

The sheet in front of Will was empty. Lucas shrugged: "The master is still concentrating."

Will glared at him: "You're welcome to take my place."

"There you are. Stop frowning all of you and come here; you can paint later." Dustin did not even stop to ask what they were doing, but beckoned them all to the table, placing the box on top. Lucas was the only one who moved, reluctantly followed by Mike, who just wanted to get this over with. Dustin lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper: "You won't believe it when you see it. So, yesterday, I heard something moving in my trash. I thought it was just a cat or something. But it wasn't a cat..."

"Thrilling." Lucas commented. Mike glanced back at Will, who kept staring at the blank page.

Dustin gave a toothy grin: "Ridicule all you want. With this, I'll become a famous scientist overnight. Ahem ahem; gentlemen, I present to you..." With the most dramatic push of a button, the box snapped open-

"Dustin, really, we have better..." Mike stopped mid-sentence. "What the hell is *that*?!"

"...the *dustoni* *pollywogus*!"

A small, slimy- thing- was slowly crawling its way onto the table. Three pairs of eyes followed its progress. It looked like an overgrown tadpole, but no tadpole had such weirdly fluorescent skin, and there also weren't any eyes anywhere. The strange thing made a high pitched chirp and turned around its axis, trying to adjust to its new environment. In the corner of his eye, Mike noticed that Will had quietly joined them, while Dustin was pulling out a bar of nougat and broke of tiny pieces for the thing to gulp down. His grin reached from ear to ear: "Great, huh? I call him D'Artagnan, or Dart for short."

Lucas was simply staring: "What is he?"

"I'll tell you what he isn't; he isn't your standard pollywog. Nor is he anything else you can find in any book. I've checked. Which means that I have discovered a new species!"

"In your trash."

"Stranger things have been found in stranger places, Lucas. But this is the first that will be named after me!" Dustin chuckled his discovery under the equivalent of a chin, and Dart made a content chirp.

"He looks so strange." Mike said. "Where did he come from?"

"I have no idea. But he's kinda cute, isn't he?"

"Well, congratulations Mr. Science." Lucas clapped him on the back. "Maybe I should check your garden and see if I can't find any more never-heard-of species, hmm?"

"Oh no you don't. Anything alien on my lawn gets discovered by me. Property rights."

"Pffff. Finders keepers."

"That's just a saying; I've got the law on my side."

Mike paid them no mind. Leaning closer, he thought he saw something moving under Dart's skin. Dustin had really made a strange find, he thought, momentarily forgetting everything else-until he happened to glance at Will. His friend's eyes were fixed on the creature, and he had become worryingly pale. "Will? What's wrong?" Mike asked, alarmed.

Eyes never leaving the thing, Will took a step back from the table. He looked like he expected it to pounce on him: "Er, Dustin? Dustin! Can you- can you put it back in the box?"

Dustin had to stop mid-argument: "Hmm, what? Why? He seems to like it here."

"Please- just do it."

"He spent the whole morning in that thing, cause none of you turned up..."

"Dustin," Mike said with a calm he didn't feel, "do as he says."

Dustin looked between the two, realizing something was off. "Em, alright? Here, little guy. Come on now."

Mike watched the *dustonium pollywogus* waddle back into its home, before he turned to Will: "What is it?"

"Mike, that noise he made- I heard it in the Upside Down. Exactly the same. And- I think last year I saw something like him there, too. No, I *know* I did." Just seeing the creature had brought all the images back in a flash. Will was feeling dizzy and had to sit down.

Everyone stared at the box. The revelation took a moment to sink in. "So you think Dart is..." Lucas began.

"From the Upside Down." Mike finished. He stepped in front of Will and reached for a pair of scissors, lacking any other weapons at hand.

"Whoa, hold on everyone!" Dustin yelled. "Put those away!"

"Dustin, if he is from the Upside Down..."

"We don't know that, and even if, so what? That doesn't make him automatically evil. Look at him; he couldn't hurt a fly."

"Oh yeah? Tell that to the monster that attacked us last year! I'm sure that was just the exception, right?"

"Yeah." Lucas agreed. "Man, for all we know you've adopted a baby Demogorgon."

"Don't be ridiculous. You're just jealous that I discovered him and not you..."

"You can't just take something from the Upside Down as your pet! Did you forget that Eleven had to stop the last thing that came through? And now Will is being attacked by a giant shadow monster for God's sake. Nothing good ever comes from that place!"

"Don't bring El into this, Mike. Dart is not..." Dustin stopped dead: "Hold on; what?!"

Mike found it very hard to stay calm: "That is why you should have answered your com. While you were dallying around with this thing, Will had another episode. The Upside Down is trying to get him; it almost did- and then you bring that here." Mike pointed at the box: "We have to get rid of this thing."

"But...but..." Dustin stammered.

"Um, guys?" a voice spoke up.

All turned to Will, who was just putting down his pen. While they were arguing, he had taken up Mike's notebook. He'd had to get the flood of images out of his mind, pour them into chalk, and something had taken shape on the page. Within an instant, Mike was at his side, followed by Lucas and an extremely bewildered Dustin, Dart momentarily forgotten. They stared at the image that Will had made. It was little more than a rough one-minute sketch, but there was no doubt what it was supposed to be- except for the fact that it left them even more confused. The item wasn't from the Upside Down at all; in fact, they had all seen it before: a golden badge inlaid with a blue circle, with the words 'Hawkins Police' engraved on the surface in

small letters.

It didn't make any sense. "Hopper?" two confused voices asked in unison.

"What?" Dustin asked.

"Yeah, look, he even drew that little ribbon he's got tied to it!" Mike pointed. "What does that mean? Will?"

Will was getting sick of repeating 'I don't know.' He felt tired and just as confused as everyone else. "I just- it *has* something to do with." How he suddenly knew that, he had no idea.

"Ok, does anybody care to explain what's going on?"

Lucas was staring at Will: "Okay, I'm not saying that you're a seer now or something, but this is seriously weird."

"I really didn't know what I was making. It's like I have this thing in my head and then I just start..."

"Anybody?"

"Maybe," Lucas stated, "this is the mysterious powers telling us we should tell an adult about this. Sounds feasible to me."

"It has to be more than that." Mike insisted. "If Will saw this, he must have something to do with the shadow monster- or with Eleven."

"Guys!" Dustin yelled. "What are you talking about El? Why are you fussing so much about a drawing? What is going on?!"

"Someone give him the short version!" Mike was racking his brain for the possible connection: "Does Hopper know anything about the Upside Down that we don't? Or has he found anything? But why would he not mention that? It doesn't make any sense."

"Um, we could just ask him." Lucas stated matter-of-factly, while Will was taking Dustin aside for a much needed explanation. "He already thinks we're crazy; a little more won't hurt there."

Mile suddenly had to laugh at the absurdity of it all. "Asking Hopper for help based on a drawing of a badge from a vision from another dimension." he summed up, ignoring Dustin's "What?"-s in the background. When had life gotten this weird? "Sure; why not?"

The jigsaw piece stared back at her almost accusingly; it just wouldn't fit anywhere, no matter where Eleven tried to place it. Its sky-blue with a bit of chimney simply didn't match with any part of the forest that was beginning to take shape on the table, and it was frustrating her more than it probably should have done. To her right, there were several dozen other pieces still waiting to be put together, each looking more fitting than this one. Still, El persisted in trying to find a place for it. It had to be there, somewhere. And it wasn't like she was in a hurry.

Day 326. She didn't need a calendar to know the exact duration, as each day was firmly edged into her mind- not for any particularly memorable events, but for the lack of them. Another try, another mismatch. El stared at the pieces with loathing, wondering once again what she was doing here. She wanted to complain to her friends, or hear them laugh, or let them dress her up; anything but sitting alone in front of this stupid puzzle. She hadn't known that you could miss somebody so much that it hurt- even though she had only known them for a week. Had it really only been a week? She couldn't really believe it. Those seven days felt like a lifetime in her mind, while the sterile laboratory that she had known all her life had begun to fade - almost like it had never happened at all. Sometimes, she liked to think it hadn't and that her past solely consisted of the time with Mike and the others. She would have liked that.

And there it was again: the impulse to simply drop everything and walk out that door, step over the tripwire and not stop until she was with Mike. The only thing stopping her was the promise she'd made- and she wondered, not for the first time, for how many more days she would be able to keep it; it was only getting harder. El sighed. It wasn't like living with Jim was bad, that really wasn't it. They might not always agree- rarely, she corrected herself- but at least he always listened.

It had been like that yesterday, too. Upon telling him of the strange

cold and the encounter with Will, he had turned into Jim the Detective and asked for every detail- though El suspected that what alarmed him more was the fact that someone might have seen her, rather than whatever else she may have felt. She could tell he didn't know what to do with her vague description of the thing that had threatened Will. Nonetheless, he had promised to look after them, make sure they were safe. It was a small step towards putting her mind at ease, and she was grateful, really.

But he still wouldn't let her go out herself, no more than on the last 325 days: "Too dangerous." Ever the same reason. The piece still wouldn't fit, stupid thing. Finally her patience ran out and she flung it away. A second, perfectly innocent jigsaw piece lifted into the air and followed the first with enough momentum to get stuck in the wall. It was when the third was just about to learn flying that El stopped mid-throw and looked over her shoulder.

She thought... she didn't know what it was. Perhaps subconsciously, she had noticed something, something that her mind couldn't quite pin down now. But something was wrong. Silent as a mouse, she moved to the window and peaked past the curtain. Nothing was stirring outside; none of the alarms had been set off, yet she was sure she had heard something. No, she thought, puzzled, not really heard. It was more a feeling. Her eyes stopped seeing the trees she was looking at as the memories came back. *A familiar feeling.*

She was back in the lab and they had brought her into the empty room. The room where they put her before the tests; three of its walls white, one black. Everybody had left and she was alone, just like now- but she wasn't, not really; there was always someone watching, someone she could never see. The black wall seemed to have eyes, eyes that silently weighed her, judged her, before the doctors would come in. It had made the hair on her neck stand up.

This didn't. It felt very similar, like someone was watching again, but she didn't feel like her every move was being judged; more like- what? What did it feel like?

Like Mike looked at her. It came to her suddenly, so suddenly that she gasped. *Friend.* Someone who looked simply for the sake of seeing her- and who she longed to see in turn. It was a feeling she had

yearned for such a long time; for someone other than Jim to meet her eyes and not see right through her, but be happy to see her.

But there was no one here, no black wall through which someone could look. Or was there? El hesitated for a second before she put on the blindfold. She didn't know what she was focusing on; she simply tried to project the strange feeling into an image, and when she opened her eyes again, the Void was all around her. But where usually there was a person- most often Mike- standing in the black, there was just nothing now. It almost felt like that first time her mind had gone here, without any knowledge of what to expect; and it unnerved her just as much. She started to walk - only to immediately be flung backwards. Surprised, she tried again, only to be repelled once more. There was suddenly an invisible barrier in her way that wouldn't let her pass, like a mental block. El tried to concentrate harder, and then she saw it: there was a tiny crack in the empty space. With careful steps, she moved towards it, not meeting any resistance this time, until her palms pressed against the small tear. And now she could hear someone behind the barrier, like they were close enough to touch. This was what she had felt, she immediately knew. Eleven drew back and hesitated, suddenly uncertain.

Back then, she had never dared touching the black wall; Papa wouldn't have liked that. She grimaced. But Papa was gone, and this had nothing to do with him. With new resolve, El started to concentrate, to put pressure on the invisible obstacle; and soon the crack in the empty space before her widened. Another attempt made another crack appear, until the surface splintered- to reveal a second layer. Onyx black, this one was visible and solid and looked strangely alive; she had to strain in order to gather enough focus to even try moving it. Her fingers went numb where she touched the cold surface, which seemed to actively resist her pressure, but in the end, it finally gave way. A third layer of flimsy, cloud grey glass took its place, barely an inch thick. And Eleven saw the outline of someone behind it. She reached out with a curious hand to tap on the surface; and a bright, warm tone echoed all around her that made her tension melt away. Whatever was on the other side, she did not need to be afraid of it.

The shadowy figure behind the barrier moved. A small hand pressed

against the glass across from hers, not even an inch separating the two. He was just as curious to see what was on the other side. A small crack appeared in between them and grew. El felt anticipation unlike anything since that first 'soon' Jim had promised her.

But then the other one pulled away. In just a moment, Eleven could only see darkness on the other side and she was alone. A yell ripped from her lips and she punched the flimsy fabric; yet where the lightest touch had made an opening, the surface did not even flinch now. Its image rapidly receded into the distance even while El started to run and tried to pull it back. Then it was gone and there was only darkness once more, before even that faded.

El stared blankly, uncomprehendingly at the puzzle in front of her. The black, the wall, the person was gone, and no matter how hard she thought of it, they didn't reappear. There was nothing. She punched the table so hard it hurt and an angry rain hailed through the cabin, spilling small pieces of forest everywhere.

"Hawkins Police Department." a woman's voice spoke up.

"Yes, hello ma'am. We'd like to speak to Jim Hopper."

"He isn't here at the moment. Can I help you?"

"Where can we reach him?" Lucas asked, ignoring the question. He had a hard time focusing with Mike just on the other side of the receiver, trying to catch every word. In the background, Will was still trying his best to fill in Dustin, who, to his credit, was restricting his outbursts to a minimum. Still, it was not an ideal setting for a calm conversation with the police.

The policewoman on the other end sounded like she was having a stressful day herself: "I'll be damned if I know; the chief was out in a rush, as usual. Who is this speaking again?"

"Ah, nobody. Could you call back when he is there?" A sudden movement caught his attention and Lucas looked up to see Mike shaking his head violently. He raised an eyebrow and got a cut-off gesture in return. "Um, scratch that. I, er, just realized it's not that

important." He put down the receiver: "What?"

"Are you mental? My parents will go crazy if the police call out of the blue! I'm already on the bench, whatever that means."

"Okay, okay, calm down." Lucas scratched his head: "How are we going to reach him then? Did you plan on camping at the police station until he shows up?"

"Well... Damn it!" Mike cursed. "There has to be some connection to El here. And- and even if there isn't, you were right; we have to tell him what is happening to Will." Mike admitted; the fear for his friend slamming back with full force. He had to get this choking feeling off his chest: "I just don't know what to do if he keeps slipping off. Back there I was almost too late..."

"You weren't, though." Lucas' expression became determined: "Whatever all of this means, we're not going to lose another party member. With or without Hopper, we'll come up with a plan, and in the meantime, we won't allow this- thing to get him. Right?"

Mike gave a fierce nod: "Right."

Just then Will and Dustin joined them. Mike was glad to see that the former had gained some color back, even while the latter was still looking a little overwhelmed. "Any luck?" Will asked.

"Hopper's not at the station, and the woman there wasn't very helpful either." Lucas filled them in. He squinted at Will: "I don't suppose you could concentrate really hard and get us a telepathic link to him or something?"

Will scoffed. "I'll let you know once I do." he replied, though he wasn't entirely sure his friend had really been jesting. "It would help if I knew why exactly we're even looking for him."

"Well, he has to be back sometime." Mike stated. "We could wait for him at the station; waylay him and- I guess start explaining as best we can."

"We could be waiting a while." Lucas said. "Do you know the working hours of a policeman?"

"Well- no."

"Me neither."

"I don't know about you, but AV club starts at 2 o'clock." Dustin spoke up for the first time.

Mike stared at him in disbelief: "Seriously? That's what you're worried about right now? I think this is a little more important than AV."

Dustin gave him one of his just-listen looks: "I do realize this, believe it or not. What I meant was Mr. Clarke will be there. We could ask for another private lesson on parallel dimensions, maybe that would help."

Lucas coughed: "I know I said we should tell someone about this, but Mr. Clarke wasn't exactly the one I had in mind."

Mike didn't understand what Dustin was getting at either: "How is that supposed to help? He doesn't know anything about the Upside Down. What are you even going to tell him? 'Excuse me, but our friend is being stalked by a demon from another dimension. Any advice?'"

"Well, not exactly, but I'm sure I can think of some way to phrase that less suspiciously." Dustin shrugged: "I might remind you that he gave us a piece by piece instruction for a sensory deprivation tank 'for curiosity's sake', and it worked out rather well. His professional opinion couldn't hurt I think."

Mike had to admit there was some truth in that. Not that he thought Mr. Clarke would have anything meaningful to add in this case, but at the very least asking him couldn't hurt, seeing how oblivious he tended to be on such matters- and until they found Hopper, he didn't have a better idea either. "Better than doing nothing, I guess. Right, AV it is."

Will glanced at his watch, having just remembered something: "Damn it. I'd better visit mom first. Before she starts to worry about me."

"Not alone you're not." Mike protested. "I'm coming along. You two go on ahead to AV if you think it's worth it. We'll catch up to you."

"Hopper's trailer is just out of town." Will added. "You could leave a note for him on the way."

"Oh, sure. Any volunteers for writing that one?" Lucas asked dryly. He shook his head: "How do I even begin to explain all this?"

"Don't. Just say we have to speak to him." Mike said. He turned to go when his eyes fell on the box that was suddenly back in Dustin's arms: "Hold on, you're not bringing that thing!" In the confusion that Will's drawing had created, he had completely forgotten the creature was still there.

"Oh for Christ's sake, Mike, we are talking about giant shadow monsters here; are you really going to worry about my pollywog?"

"Your alien, overgrown, Will-threatening pollywog?" Lucas commented. "I'd say so, yeah. But I really don't think we want to just leave it here, Mike. What if your sister finds it or something?"

Mike cursed: "Damn it. Yeah, alright, bring it. But it stays in that box. And at the earliest possibility we show this to Hopper. *Not* Mr. Clarke, understood?"

Dustin mumbled something unintelligible, but didn't press the subject any further. The entire giant-shadow-thing had somewhat unnerved him. He was just glad no one was talking of killing his new friend anymore.

Joyce Byers was the epitome of calm. At least she kept telling herself that as she paced up and down the aisles of her little shop, trying not to glance at the telephone every few seconds. It was nigh impossible to resist the urge to grab the receiver and call at the school, ask why her son hadn't phoned back yet. Then she would tell herself that she had to stop, that Will needed some space, and scolded herself for being so overprotective. Over the course of the last few minutes, this pattern had repeated itself more often than she cared to admit.

At least nobody was there to witness her strange behavior, as the shop was closed over noon. Her only customer was sitting by the counter, his eyes following her progress from the soft drinks to the

gardening tools, halfway to the phone, and back again. Finally he spoke up: "Ok Joyce, you have to stop; you're making me dizzy. I know you don't want to hear this, but you are worrying too much. They're probably just still celebrating last night's raid."

Joyce knew that perfectly well, of course. She forced herself to stand still. "Sorry. Worry is just my constant state now, hadn't you noticed?"

Bob pressed a light kiss to her brow: "Bitter doesn't suit you." He somehow managed to sound affectionate and scolding at the same time, like he was talking to a stubborn child. Joyce felt a small, self-conscious smile steal onto her face; Bob tended to have that effect. Sometimes she wondered why he had not pursued a teaching career. The children would have loved him.

It also made talking a lot easier. "Yesterday" she began to explain, "he drew this strange picture, you see. It was like a huge shadow in the sky, and he wouldn't tell me what it was. He's not talking about it, but it's getting worse; the nightmares. It's just not fair that it's still haunting him, it's not fair." She met Bob's eyes, so impossibly understanding, and sighed: "I knew things couldn't just go back to the way they were, but all I wanted was for him to have a somewhat normal life. Is that so much to ask?"

"It's not. God knows, if there are any two people who didn't deserve this, it's you. But it's going to be normal eventually. Look, Will will be fine. He's a strong kid. And he's got all those fine friends of his; they'll be looking out for him." Just then, the bell rang as the front door opened. Bob glanced up: "Ah, speak of the devil..."

Joyce looked at her son with a mix of relief and surprise: "Will. Shouldn't you be at school?"

"Er, Math was cancelled." he replied. She was startled to see he was still wearing his costume. Mike entered behind him. "Yeah, uh, the prof got ill or something. Hello Mrs. Byers."

"Hey, you two." Bob greeted.

Will suddenly lowered his eyes. He was looking at his feet when he handed Bob his camera back. "I'm sorry if it's damaged. I've dropped

it yesterday."

Bob knocked against the casing and pressed a few buttons. The machine hummed to life without any disturbance. "Looks perfectly fine. Just don't worry about it kiddo." He grinned: "Some evil monster scare you, or why would you drop this precious?"

It was only a slight lowering of the eyes, but Joyce didn't miss it. Within a heartbeat it was over and Will was reciprocating the grin, saying something about a clown. Didn't he sound a little forced?

You're worrying too much. Am I? Somebody needs to. Joyce cleared her throat: "Will, I wanted to talk to you really quick. Bob, could you give us a moment?"

"Yeah, sure. Hey there, Mike. Is that a rubix cube...?"

"Are you alright?" Joyce asked her son as soon as they disappeared behind the aisles.

"What? Yes, of course I am."

"What happened on your tour? Did something frighten you?"

Will shook his head: "It was just that clown and his friends. They scared me and made me trip and one of them called me freak. And I dropped Bob's camera; I'm sorry. That's all it was."

Freak. That's all it was. Why couldn't he just be allowed to have fun for one night? Joyce's hands clenched into fists: "Do you know who they were? Have they done this before?"

"No..."

"Are they why you weren't at school?"

"No! Mom, really, it's not a big deal. I haven't even thought about these guys all morning, okay?"

He looked at her with those big eyes that just couldn't lie. Joyce nodded, calming down a little. Perhaps she had overreacted, because Will really didn't seem preoccupied with it. Sometimes she forgot that

he had been through far worse than a couple of school bullies- which didn't mean she would let them get away that easily. "Okay. I'm sorry for getting all worried. I just want you to know that you can talk to me about such things. Whatever happens, Jonathan and I will always be here for you. You know that, right?"

Will swallowed. In that moment, he was so close to telling her. Telling her how things really were. She would understand, of course she would...But he just couldn't. If he did, she would never let him leave the house again- and he wouldn't be able to help Mike. "Thanks mom." was all he managed.

"Right, enough with the serious talk now. Except for those guys, how was your Halloween? Did you rob the people blind again?"

Will nodded, glad to be back on safer ground: "Yeah. We got almost more than we know what to do with. Our haul is still back at Mike's..." he stopped when the clock caught his attention, "...and we should be at AV in five minutes." he finished. "Shit. Gotta dash."

"A little late to be thinking of that." Joyce sighed. "And my break was already over five minutes ago... Bob?" she called.

He poked his head around a corner: "At your service."

"Could you take these two to the AV club? They're already running late."

"AV club? They still haven't shut that thing down?" Bob gave Will an appreciative nod: "And you're participating? Great. I guess there are more nerds around than I thought. Just hop in when you're ready."

"Oh Bob, you're an angel!" She gave him a kiss goodbye; one that took far too long, and Will quickly turned away to inform Mike.

Bob had parked just across the street, the car left unlocked, and they both jumped in. "Was she worried?" Mike asked.

Will nodded. The conversation had left a sick feeling in his stomach. "I hate lying to her. But the alternative would be worse."

Mike squeezed his shoulder: "We'll sort this out, don't worry. I..."

He was interrupted when Bob got in and started the car, humming a carefree tune. He always seemed to be in a good mood: "Right; one taxi to Hawkins Middle, as ordered. Might be I'll even have time to check in with Scott before I have to be back at the Shack; what do you think?"

Will had actually been surprised to find him at mom's shop. He would have preferred to dash in, say hello to her and dash out, without interference. "Have you and mom timed your work breaks or something?" he asked curiously.

Bob smiled: "Maybe."

Will shot a meaningful glance back at Mike and rolled his eyes, though in truth he didn't really mind having Bob around. It felt seriously weird seeing them kiss and all, but he really was nice, and mom tended to be a lot more relaxed when he was around. The only problem was that Bob didn't know anything of what had happened last fall. Will kept thinking that at some point he would have to find out- especially with what was going on now, a guilty part of his mind added.

They had been driving for a good five minutes before Bob suddenly asked: "So, what were you guys doing all morning?"

The question had a far too innocent undertone. Will coughed: "Sorry?"

"I'm just saying, if my Math class was cancelled, I wouldn't go straight back home, you know. Not when there were so many other things you could do with all that time. I mean, just hypothetically speaking."

"Oh." Will stuttered. "Yeah, so many other things-"

"We were just hanging out at our hut, out in the forest." Mike jumped in. "Just having fun. But don't tell Mrs. Byers, please."

"My lips are sealed." Bob chuckled. "I can't really fault you. Believe it or not, me and your mom used to be adventurers ourselves when we were your age." He caught Will's look: "It's the truth! Back then, we used to play cops and robbers with good old Jim. Do you still play

that? His gramps owned that old shack in the middle of the woods; perfect for the game. That said, it wasn't much fun, though; Jim'd catch us every time." He shook his head: "That policeman-gift for finding people was already established, if you ask me. Some kids do start early, it seems. Not that I'm a robber today, mind you." Bob laughed.

Will smiled tiredly to himself. Bob had this simple way of talking that just made him feel at ease. "I'm just trying to imagine Hopper as a kid. It's not really working."

Mike snorted from the backseat: "I know what you mean. I'm just picturing a boy with cowboy hat, badge and beard already in place."

"He's still got that stupid hat?"

"Never seen him without it. As a matter of fact, we wanted to speak to him; you wouldn't happen to have seen..."

The conversation faded into the background. Will stared out the window, his thoughts wandering and blurring together. The badge, the cold shadow, Eleven, Hopper. *A gift for finding people*. The gaunt shapes of the trees rushing past the car became a blur as he closed his eyes, feeling strangely exhausted. If he could just nip off for a few moments...

He was alone. His castle surrounded him, with the monster growling outside, and he shivered both from cold and fear. How long had it been? He didn't know; he only knew he couldn't hold on much longer. No one was coming; deep down he was beginning to realize this. He decided to close his eyes, just for a few moments...and felt something, something he'd almost forgotten: warmth. It was a hand on his shoulder, a friendly presence in this cold place. Like a fire it warmed him, spreading through his bones and beating in his chest. It lent him the strength to open his eyes once more. She was there, a small light against the darkness, making a promise.

Goodbye. In a moment, her fire was swept away like smoke, leaving nothing but ashes in its place. A faint scream reached his ears: *Mike!* Suddenly Will's view was blurred, as if he was looking through a dirty window, yet he saw the tiny flicker of light behind it. It was

only an ember, a candle in the dark, but somehow it refused to be smothered and kept burning. Then it flared up once again and broke free of the cold embrace, only to vanish from his sight. Will started to hammer against the window that locked him outside and it burst with a sharp crack that seemed to echo through him. Suddenly he was in a frozen winter forest: She was there again, the only dot of color in a strangely colorless place, but now she was burning low, without her former energy. Lonely. A painfully familiar feeling. Will wanted to reach out to her, as she had comforted him. "Thank you." he whispered. She wasn't alone, couldn't she see?

The scene changed again. Someone had joined her, and suddenly all seemed warmer: There was music playing, furniture scraping, a gruff voice spoke: "...ground rules...", and for the first time, Will could feel something like happiness from her.

5:15. Her fire was an angry blaze, hot to the touch. He had to back away from it, shielding his face from the sudden heat. In its frustration it burned away the wood and the world itself, until they were surrounded by darkness once more.

Mike! This time it was his own voice. He saw a shadow enter the fire's glow and the cold returned, its fingers outstretched for a lone boy in the distance. But *he* was that boy. The chill took over his body and he had to gasp for breath. Her warmth was just inches away, yet it couldn't reach him, as much as she tried. He forced his eyes to remain open for a little moment longer and caught a last glimpse of her outstretched hand before everything went black under the shadow's suffocating grip.

Even as both their screams lingered in his mind, Will found himself back in the van, Bob talking away beside him. Behind the window, the roadside trees had given way to the buildings of Hawkins. His head hurt like after a migraine and he had to struggle to produce a clear thought. Then he noticed something warm and sticky in his nostrils.

"...told them it was nonsense back then. But of course nobody listens to..."

"Bob." Will interrupted, frantic. The memories were already slipping

through his fingers like water through a sieve and he had to say-*something*- important. "That hut where you used to play." The words tumbled out before Will's mind could even consciously form them. He didn't know whether it was a question or a statement.

"Yeah? What about it?" Bob glanced at him and frowned: "Hey; are you okay?"

"Can you take us there?" Will was dimly aware of Mike's sudden gasp when he saw the blood coming from his nose, but he couldn't focus on that now; he had to know what it meant, the little he could remember.

Bob laughed: "What, right now? I didn't realize kids were still so into cops and robbers."

"Bob, please, I think we have to be there. It's important."

Bob glanced at him: "Kiddo, right now you two have to be at Hawkins Middle, and my next shift starts soon. We can go exploring the woods at the weekend, if you like, but right now Joyce wants you at school, so that's where I'm going."

They were already turning into the school's driveway. Will was thinking fast. He opened the glove compartment and after a quick search he came up with a map of Hawkins and the surrounding area: "Can you mark it then? The hut."

Bob raised an eyebrow, not quite knowing what to make of this: "Well- I mean, sure. It's not exactly close though. Okay, just promise you won't run off there by yourself, yeah? I mean, Joyce would kill you, and probably me as well while she's at it. You don't want that, do you?"

Will's thoughts flashed back to the cold grip that had nearly drowned him and he shivered. *That* he could remember clearly, and he had no intention of going alone. "Promise." he said.

That seemed to satisfy Bob, who reached for a pen and studied the map. Like a treasure hunt, he thought as he marked the roundabout space of forest he remembered. It couldn't do the kid any harm to go

exploring, right? He handed the map back to Will: "X marks the spot."

"Thanks." Will smiled. Suddenly a lot more energetic- suspiciously so-, he jumped out of the car, followed by the Wheeler boy, and the two of them hurried off towards the bike racks. They looked far too eager, even for the AV club, Bob thought. He got the itchy feeling he might have made a mistake. "No running off!" he called after them in a rather helpless gesture. Neither of them even turned around. As they went inside, Bob saw them fussing over the map. His car remained on the parking lot for another minute or so, while he was contemplating what that had been all about. Then he shook his head and turned the ignition. He was already late.

Been working for a while on this one. To avoid confusion; I've just combined chapters 1 and 2 into one, for coherency's sake.

I got a major boost of inspiration from Miracle of Sound's new song 'Upside Down'. If you somehow haven't heard it yet, go over to Youtube and listen in!